



Scientists call for mainstreaming of pastoralism

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Pastoralism offers the best option of livelihood for the poor in arid and semi arid regions of Africa, scientists say in Nairobi

Research scientists meeting in Nairobi yesterday called for mainstream policy support for the pastoral communities as pastoral livestock production systems among communities living in Africa's arid and semi-arid lands still provide the surest means out of poverty.

They said that these policy interventions should go beyond the traditional reactionary disaster mitigation and recovery approaches.

Research undertaken among the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania has revealed that the poorest pastoral families and those most vulnerable to droughts are those that have been dispossessed of communal lands and livestock through the on-going large-scale privatization of rangelands in favor of conservation and commercial crop farming.

Dr Ernestina Coast of the London School of Economics told a conference organized by ILRI in Nairobi that families that have diversified their livelihood activities adopting farming, conservation and other forms of employment are generally poorer than those that still keep livestock.

"Livestock remains absolutely vital for pastoral livelihoods in both Kenya and Tanzania, while incomes from conservation activities are performing poorly," Dr Coast told participants of a policy research conference on Pastoralism and Poverty Reduction in East Africa.

Rangelands in Sub-Saharan Africa have undergone dramatic changes in ownership and utilization that have greatly restricted nomadic pastoralists' access to key pastures, water sources and even migration routes.

This has increased pastoralists' vulnerability to drought, threatening families and entire communities with poverty.

"Pastoralism is a very rational livelihood decision," stated Dr Coast. "If not supported through imaginative policy solutions, we will see a downward spiral in the quality of lives and livelihoods of rangeland communities, from which it is very difficult to recover."

A number of initiatives have been promoted as alternative livelihood strategies amongst them conservation and ecotourism projects.

However, the research is challenging the value of these livelihood options saying they have not added value to pastoralists.

"Our findings show that incomes derived from conservations activities in pastoral communities perform very poorly leading us to challenge the assumption that such alternatives are at all pro-poor", Dr Coast said.

Both Kenya and Tanzania have witnessed extensive reallocation of rangelands from open, communally owned areas accessible for free-range livestock production, to conservation through gazettement of protected areas as well as for commercial agriculture. In Kenya, the rest have been sub-divided and individual titles issues, while in Tanzania allocation of exclusive rights for ranching, farming or wildlife enterprise is common.

These trends are not only threatening the pastoral way of life but are also pushing ill-adapted pastoral communities progressively into poverty. Poor pastoral families have as a result been forced to diversity into unskilled, low-paying jobs such as casual laborers, or gathering honey, brewing and selling illicit brews, selling firewood and charcoal.

Kenya Bureau